

## Meet the youth that are tackling illiteracy in South Africa one book at a time

It is 8 am on Monday morning at Ekukhanyisweni Primary School in Alexandra township, Johannesburg. Refilwe Matomela, a 24-year-old resident of Alexandra, sits down with a Grade 4 learner to start a one-on-one reading session in the container library at the school.

Refilwe is one of 13 Literacy Tutors who provide dedicated reading help to learners at the school. Affectionately called “Reading Leaders” by the young learners, each Literacy Tutor meets with five children who struggle to read twice a week, providing them with one-on-one reading support.



The literacy intervention comes as a huge relief at Ekukhanyisweni Primary. Like many primary schools in township communities in South Africa, Ekukhanyisweni struggles under the pressure of overcrowded classrooms and limited resources and manpower. Children who battle to read do not receive the individual teacher attention they desperately need and, as a result, they are left behind while the school curriculum steams ahead. The future of these primary school children is grim because if you cannot read, you cannot learn, closing all doors to a better future.

### **The Literacy Crisis in South Africa**

These struggles are felt by children across the country. In fact, 78% of Grade 4 learners in South Africa cannot read for meaning. This sobering statistic indicates the reality and magnitude of the literacy crisis that prevails across the country. It is a crisis that spills over into future generations and touches every area of society.

What is even more devastating is that behind the shocking statistic is a generation of children who are being robbed of future opportunities because they cannot read.

While the cause of the literacy crisis is deeply complex, helping children learn to read is simple. The key lies in individual, dedicated attention, which also happens to be one of the scarcest resources in many South African schools. For many children, simply sitting with a Literacy Tutor and receiving one-on-one reading help would dramatically reduce the heart-breaking illiteracy statistic.

Thankfully, someone is doing something about it - **The Youth.**

### **The Power of Youth as Changemakers**

From the townships of Khayelitsha to Diepsloot and Alexandra, young people, like Refilwe, are making a difference in their communities through reading. Refilwe and her fellow Literacy Tutors at Ekukhanyisweni are enrolled in the help2read Literacy Tutor Programme, a year-long skills development programme that trains literate, yet unemployed youth to provide reading help to primary school learners.

As a Literacy Tutor, Refilwe meets with five students for 30-minute reading sessions at least twice a week. The demand for reading help is high and there are always more children to assist. Day by day, reading session after reading session, Refilwe begins to see improvement in her learners' reading. What's more, the learners who once hated books now cannot wait for their reading session to start. As each day passes, more and more children in Refilwe's community are falling in love with reading, which is praised to be one of the key factors in educational achievement and the doorway to future opportunities.



It is this consistent, dedicated reading support that is changing communities for good.

And while the Literacy Tutors have a meaningful impact on their communities through reading, they also gain valuable work experience and skills training. This has proven to be crucial in South Africa's current economic climate where millions of youth are unemployed.

Three terms into the 2018 school year, help2read has so far reached 1,907 learners through our one-on-one reading help in primary schools in South Africa's most disadvantaged neighbourhoods: 674 learners were helped by 358 volunteers through our Volunteer Reading Helper programme and an astonishing number of 1233 primary school children were supported by 106 Literacy Tutors through our Literacy Tutor Programme. On top of that, our Community Holiday Reading Clubs -led by the Literacy Tutors- are now in full fling and are very well received by the communities we work in. Each school holiday, we reach up to 2,500 children (aged 4-13) from township communities we work in through our Holiday Reading Clubs, enabling us to vastly expand our reach beyond the one-on-one reading sessions and grow a love of reading throughout these communities, outside of the classroom.

### Literacy Month

September is Literacy Month - one of our favourite and most exciting months of the year, providing us with many opportunities to celebrate Literacy. This September was no exception, with the help2read team, Literacy Tutors, Volunteer Reading Helpers, teachers and learners celebrating Literacy throughout the whole month.

Activities ranged from Reading Circles, distributions of books to schools and neighbouring day care centres to hosting donor visits, puppet shows and, most excitingly, hosting our September Community Reading Clubs.





We are proud of our Literacy Tutors whose creative and efficient planning ensured a series of successfully executed Reading Clubs at both our Cape Town and Johannesburg partner schools. The activities in the Clubs ranged from reading circles, visiting neighbouring day care centres and distributing Lego Boxes.

Learners at Pauw Gedenk School were able to enjoy Puppet shows by UNIMA, who shared tales of the importance of literacy and the love for reading through the use of their incredible Puppets.

We are hugely grateful to all the literacy champions, authors, the Lego Foundation and donors such as Terre Des Hommes who participated in our Literacy Month activities and celebrated the importance of Literacy with us.



Thank you to all Literacy Champions that supported our Literacy Month celebrations



Books donated by Bridge House Pre-Primary to Wemmershoek Primary



Puppet Show at Pauw Gedenk School



Reading Circle at Carter Primary School